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CULT OF THE LAMB™

Nº2

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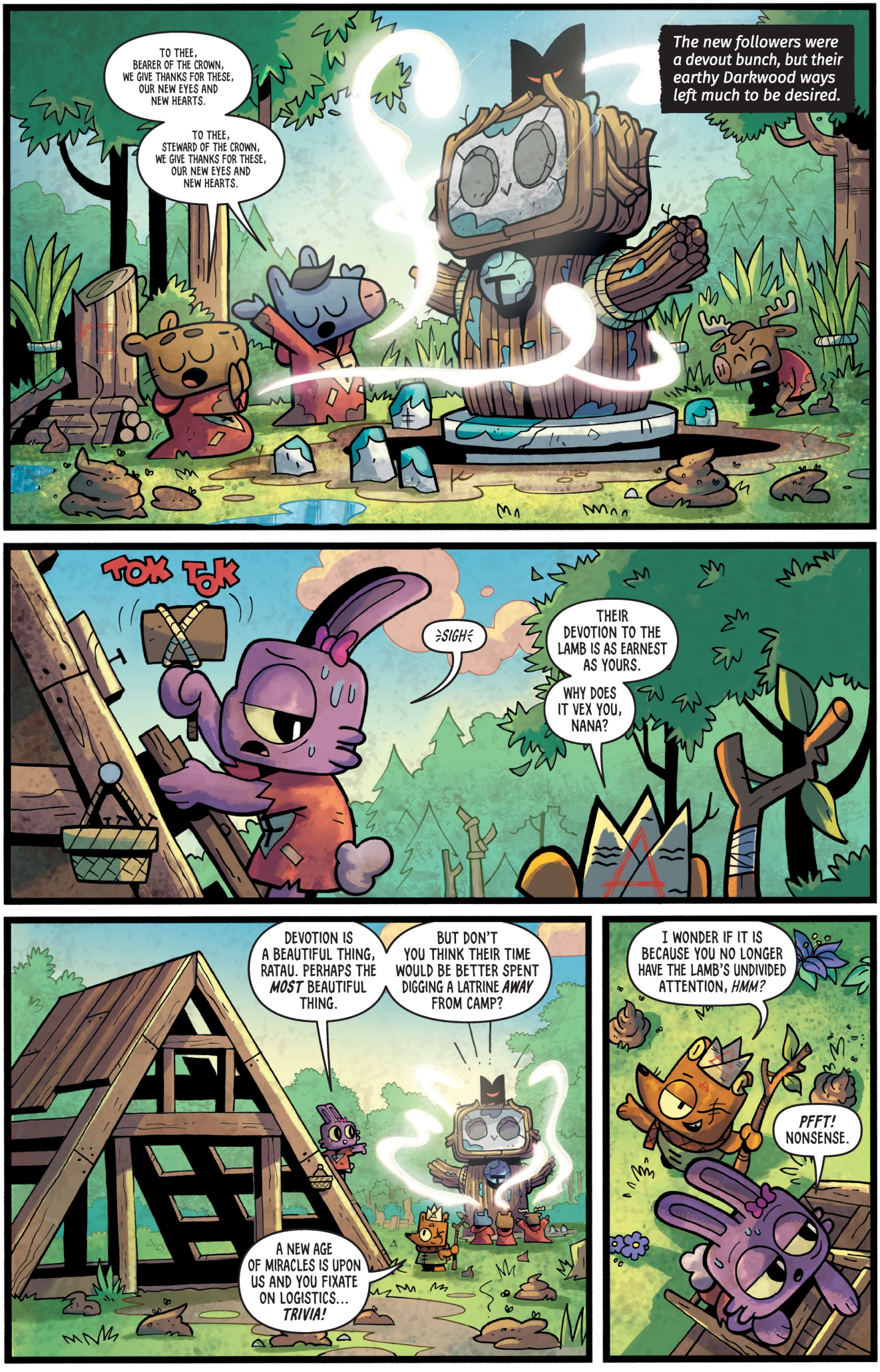
The Lamb was back in Darkwood, converting new believers to the cause.
But in their absence, the great work proceeded apace.
CHOP
WACK
TOK TOK
CHIP CHIP CHIP


TO THEE, BEARER OF THE CROWN, WE GIVE THANKS FOR THESE, OUR NEW EYES AND NEW HEARTS.
TO THEE, STEWARD OF THE CROWN, WE GIVE THANKS FOR THESE, OUR NEW EYES AND NEW HEARTS.
The new followers were a devout bunch, but their earthy Darkwood ways left much to be desired.
TOK TOK
SIGH
THEIR DEVOTION TO THE LAMB IS AS EARNEST AS YOURS.
WHY DOES IT VEX YOU, NANA?
DEVOTION IS A BEAUTIFUL THING, RATAU. PERHAPS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING.
BUT DON'T YOU THINK THEIR TIME WOULD BE BETTER SPENT DIGGING A LATRINE AWAY FROM CAMP?
A NEW AGE OF MIRACLES IS UPON US AND YOU FIXATE ON LOGISTICS... TRIVIA!
I WONDER IF IT IS BECAUSE YOU NO LONGER HAVE THE LAMB'S UNDIVIDED ATTENTION, HMM?
PFFT! NONSENSE.

"IS IT? UNTIL NOW, YOU WERE THE LAMB'S CONFIDANTE AND *CHIEF DISTRACTION* IN THIS TIMELESS IDYLL.

"A *PLAYMATE* KEEPING THEM FROM THEIR TRUE PURPOSE."

BUT YOU AND I ARE *BLESSED PAWNS* IN AN ANCIENT GAME OF GODS AND PROVIDENCE, NANA.

YOU FORGET YOUR *PLACE*. I HAVE NOT.

"SOON, THE LAMB YOU KNEW WILL BE GONE--SWALLOWED BY THE HORROR AND THE SPLENDOR OF THEIR STATION. IT IS INEVITABLE.

"BUT TAKE COMFORT. THOUGH WE WADE ACROSS AN *OCEAN OF BLOOD*, GOLDEN SANDS AND SWEET ABUNDANCE AWAIT US ON THE FAR SHORE."

WE HAVE ENOUGH *HERE*, YOU FLEA-BITTEN OLD STRAY!!

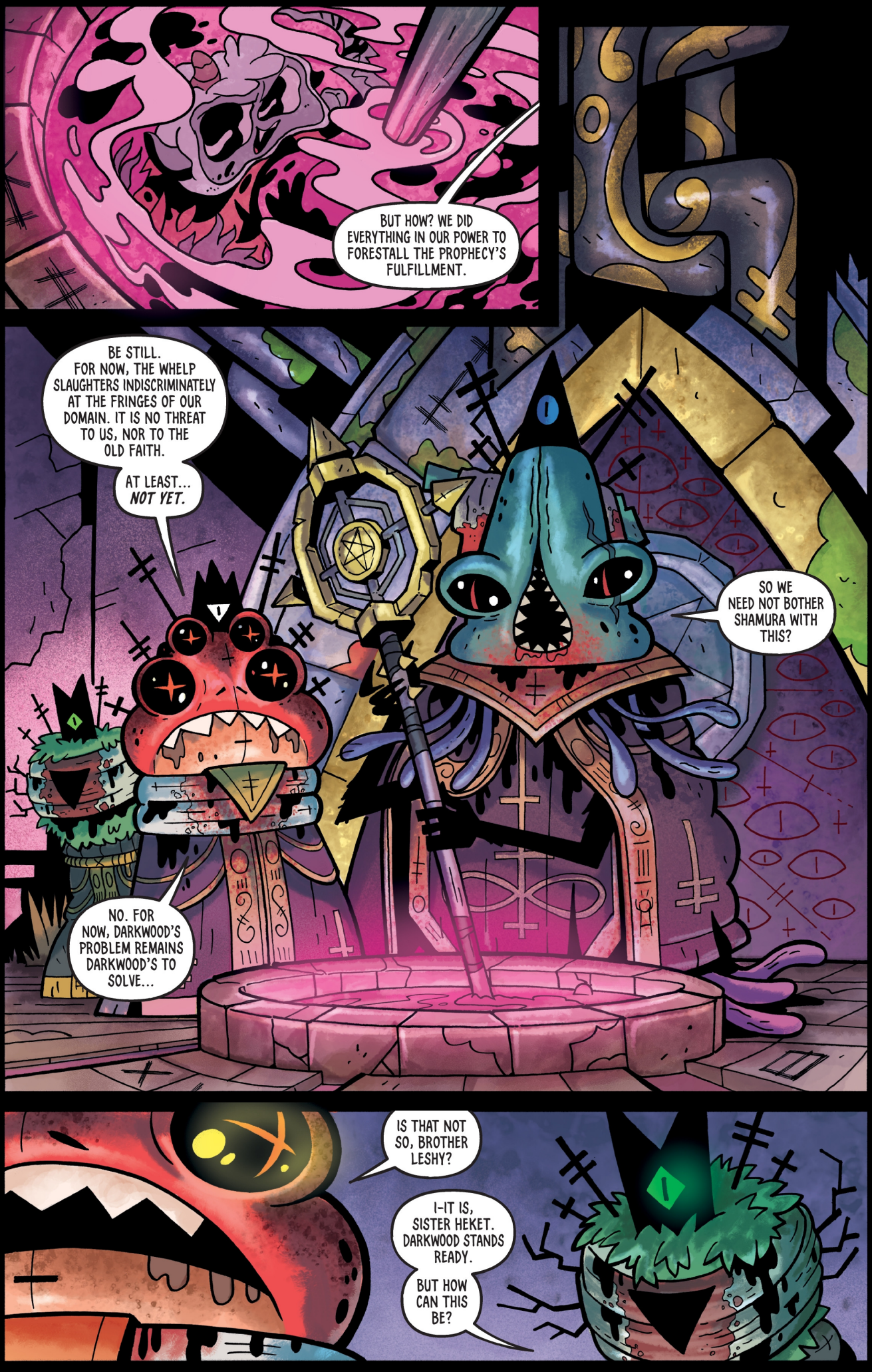
MY CROWN!!

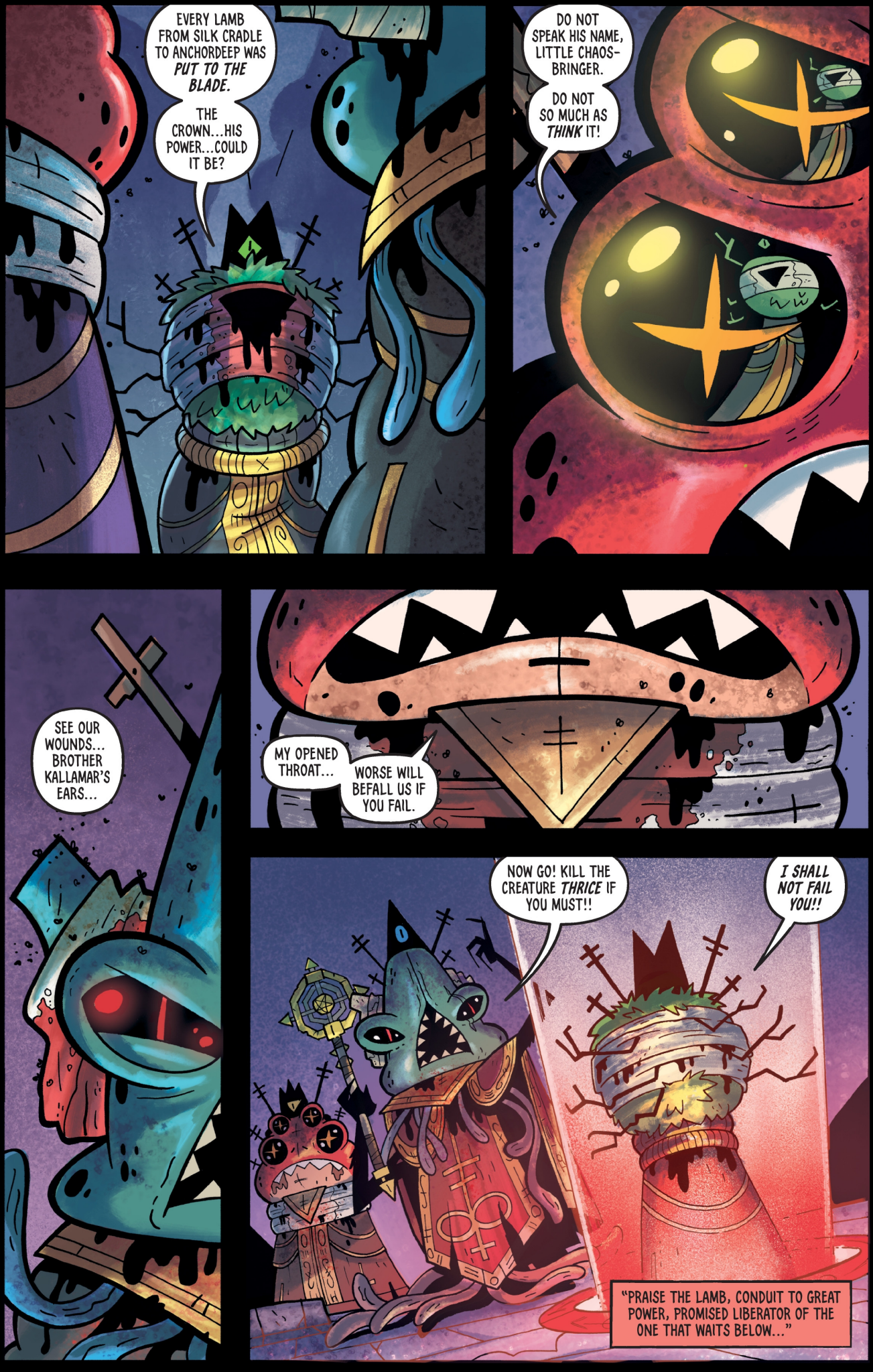
WHAK

WE HAVE *MORE* THAN ENOUGH.

For many in Darkwood, the Lamb came as a liberator.
Some even gave muttered thanks when they slew the unruly things that had terrorized them for so long.
The strength of the Old Faith, the Lamb was learning, lay solely in its capacity to inspire **fear.**
HELLO?
FEAR NOT! I BRING HAPPY TIDINGS!
MY MASTER WISHES ME TO BREAK YOUR FETTERS AND DELIVER YOU FROM YOUR ROTTED CREED!
ALL HE ASKS IS YOUR DEVOTION!
And so naturally, the Lamb grew somewhat...

...let's say **confident.**
AHA! BUT WHETSTONES TO SHARPEN MY BLADE WILL DO JUST AS WELL.
VERY WELL. THE BLADE IT IS.
"SO IT *IS* TRUE. THE RED CROWN SITS UPON THE BROW OF *ANOTHER.*"


BUT HOW? WE DID EVERYTHING IN OUR POWER TO FORESTALL THE PROPHECY'S FULFILLMENT.
BE STILL. FOR NOW, THE WHELP SLAUGHTERS INDISCRIMINATELY AT THE FRINGES OF OUR DOMAIN. IT IS NO THREAT TO US, NOR TO THE OLD FAITH.
AT LEAST... NOT YET.
SO WE NEED NOT BOTHER SHAMURA WITH THIS?
NO. FOR NOW, DARKWOOD'S PROBLEM REMAINS DARKWOOD'S TO SOLVE...
IS THAT NOT SO, BROTHER LESHY?
I-IT IS, SISTER HEKET. DARKWOOD STANDS READY.
BUT HOW CAN THIS BE?

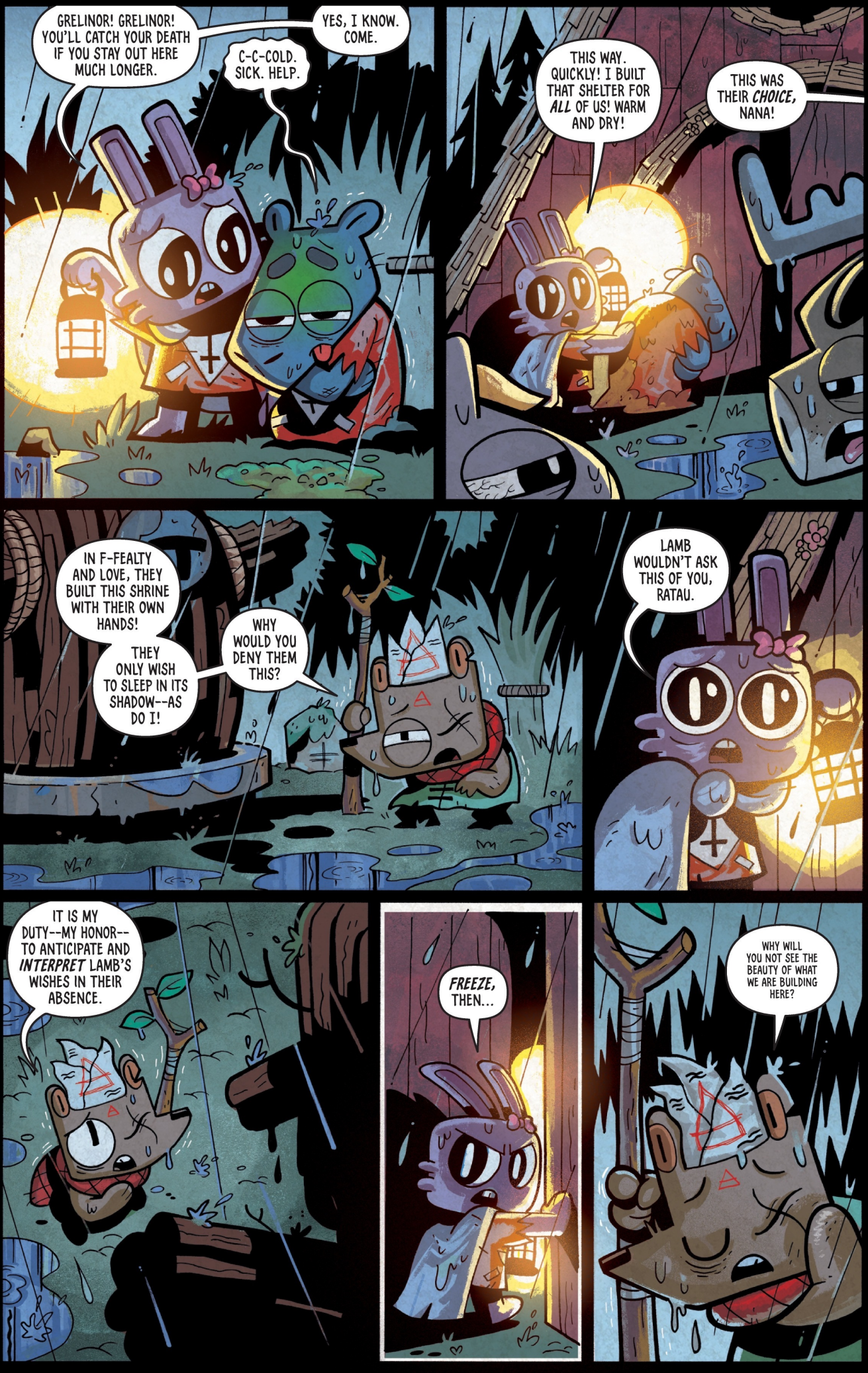

EVERY LAMB FROM SILK CRADLE TO ANCHORDEEP WAS *PUT TO THE BLADE.*
THE CROWN...HIS POWER...COULD IT BE?
DO NOT SPEAK HIS NAME, LITTLE CHAOS-BRINGER.
DO NOT SO MUCH AS *THINK* IT!
SEE OUR WOUNDS... BROTHER KALLAMAR'S EARS...
MY OPENED THROAT...
WORSE WILL BEFALL US IF YOU FAIL.
NOW GO! KILL THE CREATURE *THRICE* IF YOU MUST!!
I SHALL NOT FAIL YOU!!
"PRAISE THE LAMB, CONDUIT TO GREAT POWER, PROMISED LIBERATOR OF THE ONE THAT WAITS BELOW..."

...SO THE CARDS SHOWED ME ONCE, MANY LIFETIMES AGO (OR HAS THAT YET TO BE?).
A SEER?!
HOW I COULD HAVE USED YOUR GIFTS BEFORE MY DATE WITH THE EXECUTIONER'S BLADE.
They had heard of such creatures-- soothsayers, older than trees, whose auguries made even the Bishops tremble.
TELL ME, LAMB, DO YOU BELIEVE IN DESTINY IMMUTABLE?
I DID...
But the Lamb feared no one.
...BUT NOW, AS YOU CAN SEE, I CARVE MY OWN DESTINY.
IS THAT SO? THEN I MUST CONGRATULATE YOU, FOR YOU ARE THE FIRST IN ALL THE WORLD TO DO SO.
NOW COME. TARRY A WHILE. LEND YOURSELF TO THE DRAW OF A CARD.
AH. "THE DEAL IS DONE, BUT AT WHAT COST?"
YES, THE TERMS OF BARGAINS STRUCK IN ANGER SELDOM BENEFIT THE OBLIGOR.

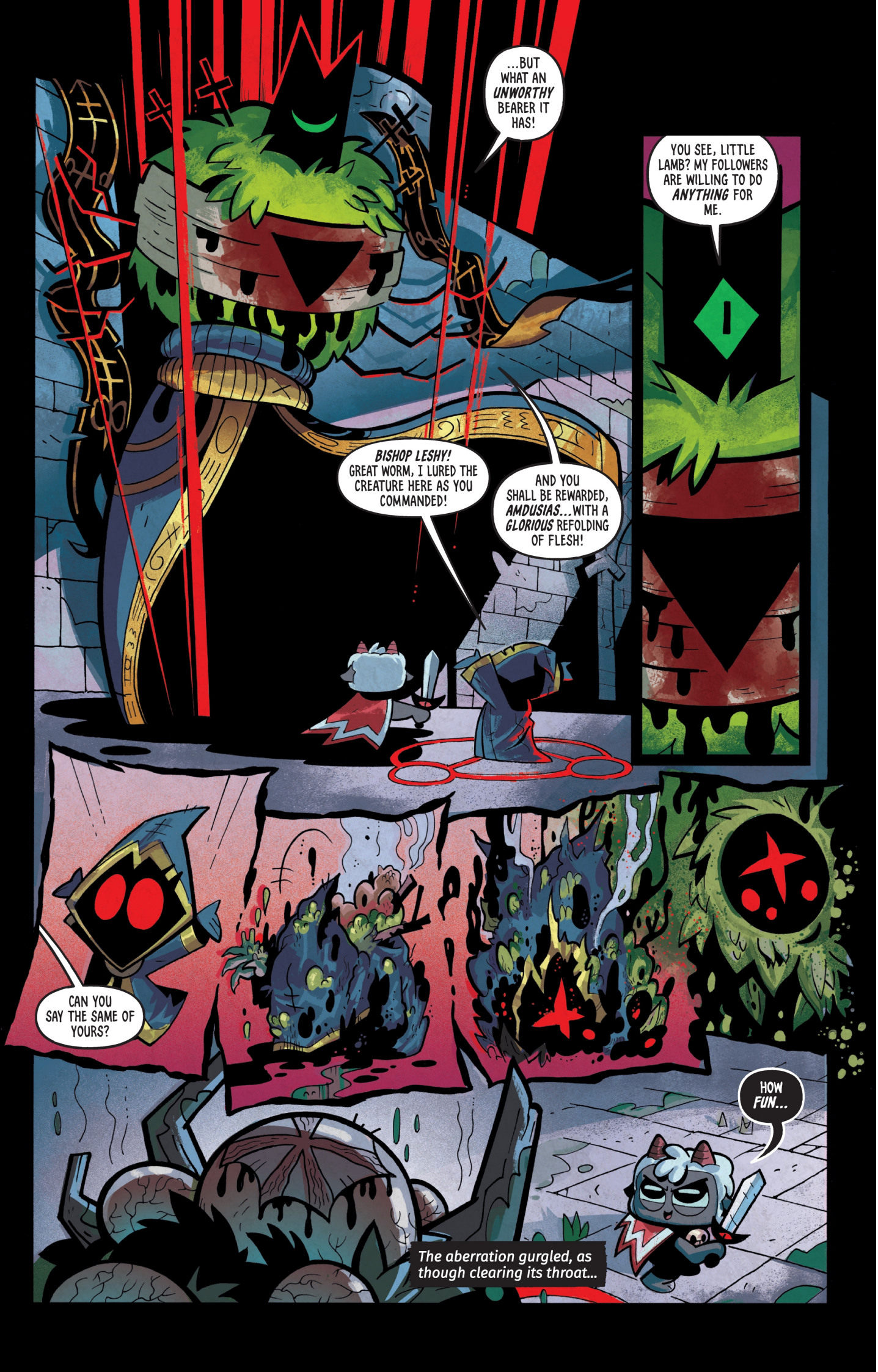
The Red Crown, which knew the Seer's name to be "Clauneck," made the whole deck of futures dance.
However, the die was already cast.
AN INAUSPICIOUS CARD TO BE SURE, BUT THERE IS ANOTHER YET TO BE DRAWN.
"A heart rife with vicious corruption."
YOUR CARDS HAVE BEEN DRAWN. THE PATH LAYS AHEAD.
I AM SORRY, BUT FOR YOU THE WAY IS RUTTED AND FRAUGHT WITH WOE.
NNN...
No.

The Lamb had simply come too far.
WHAT DO THE CARDS MEAN, SLUG?
I AM A DUCK.
SPEAK PLAINLY OR NEVER SPEAK AGAIN, DUCK.
NO MORE RIDDLES.
THE FUTURE IS OPAQUE--EVEN TO ME--BUT THIS MUCH IS CLEAR...
...YOU WILL BE BETRAYED.
IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE DIFFERENT.
WHAT CAN I DO?
So the Seer told them.

KR-
KOW
HURL
MADNESS.
THIS IS MADNESS.

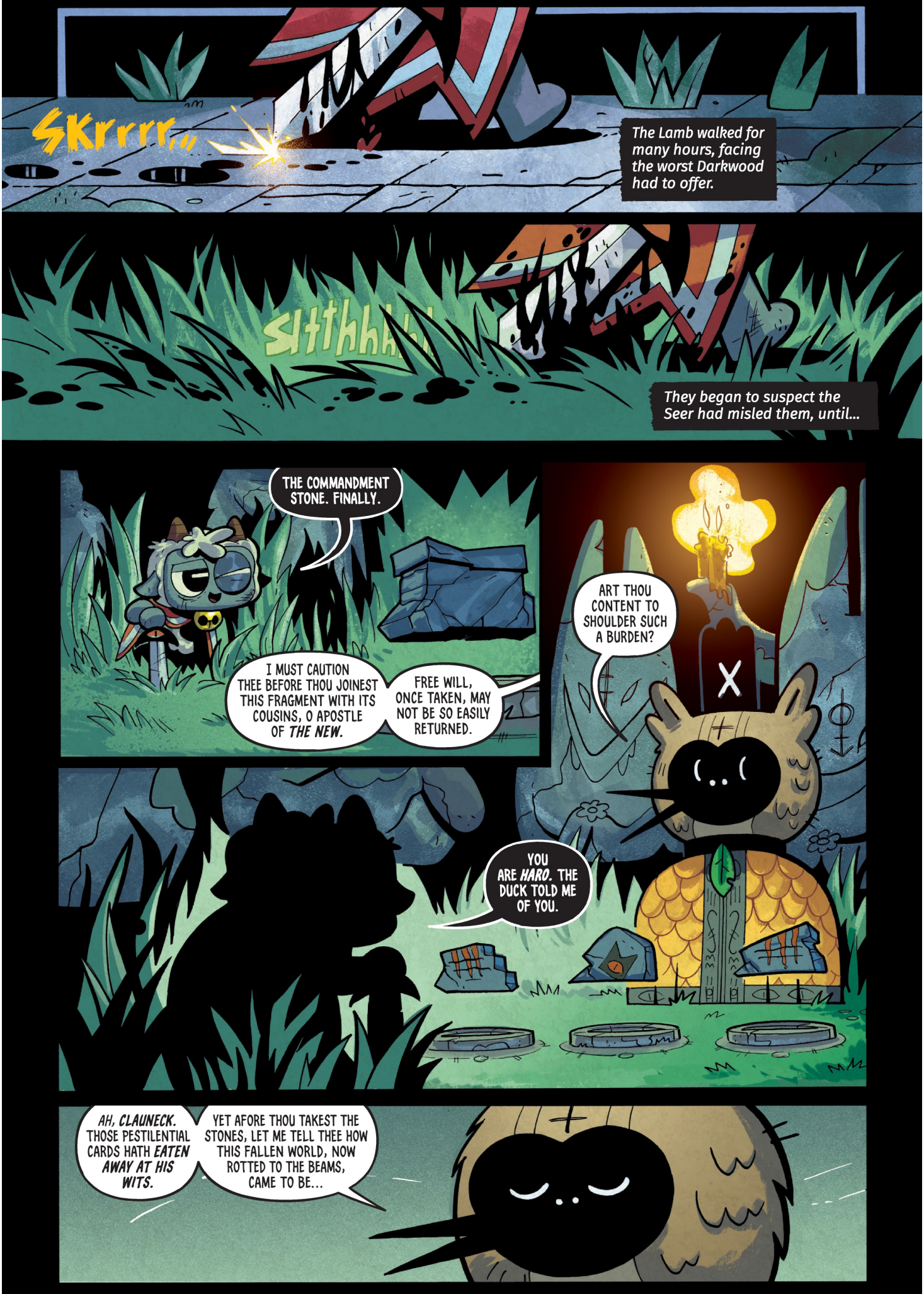

GRELINOR! GRELINOR! YOU'LL CATCH YOUR DEATH IF YOU STAY OUT HERE MUCH LONGER.
C-C-COLD. SICK. HELP.
YES, I KNOW. COME.
THIS WAY. QUICKLY! I BUILT THAT SHELTER FOR *ALL* OF US! WARM AND DRY!
THIS WAS THEIR *CHOICE*, NANA!
IN F-FEALTY AND LOVE, THEY BUILT THIS SHRINE WITH THEIR OWN HANDS!
THEY ONLY WISH TO SLEEP IN ITS SHADOW--AS DO I!
WHY WOULD YOU DENY THEM THIS?
LAMB WOULDN'T ASK THIS OF YOU, RATAU.
IT IS MY DUTY--MY HONOR--TO ANTICIPATE AND *INTERPRET* LAMB'S WISHES IN THEIR ABSENCE.
FREEZE, THEN...
WHY WILL YOU NOT SEE THE BEAUTY OF WHAT WE ARE BUILDING HERE?

CHNK! CHNK! CHNK!
HAIL TO YOU, O LAMB!
I BEG YOU, SPARE MY WORTHLESS LIFE THAT I MIGHT PLEDGE MY LIFE'S BLOOD TO YOUR CAUSE.
...
WHY?
The prophecy reverberated in the Lamb's ears.
SO YOU CAN BETRAY ME?
NEVER! PLEASE, I BEG YOU!
VERY WELL, BUT KNOW THIS...
SOON I WILL HAVE IN MY POSSESSION SOMETHING THAT WILL GUARANTEE YOUR LOYALTY...
ARE YOU SURE YOU WOULD NOT PREFER A SWIFT AND MERCIFUL--
THE RED CROWN RISES AGAIN...


...BUT WHAT AN *UNWORTHY* BEARER IT HAS!
YOU SEE, LITTLE LAMB? MY FOLLOWERS ARE WILLING TO DO *ANYTHING* FOR ME.
BISHOP LESHY! GREAT WORM, I LURED THE CREATURE HERE AS YOU COMMANDED!
AND YOU SHALL BE REWARDED, *AMDUSIAS*...WITH A *GLORIOUS* REFOLDING OF FLESH!
CAN YOU SAY THE SAME OF YOURS?
HOW *FUN*...
The aberration gurgled, as though clearing its throat...

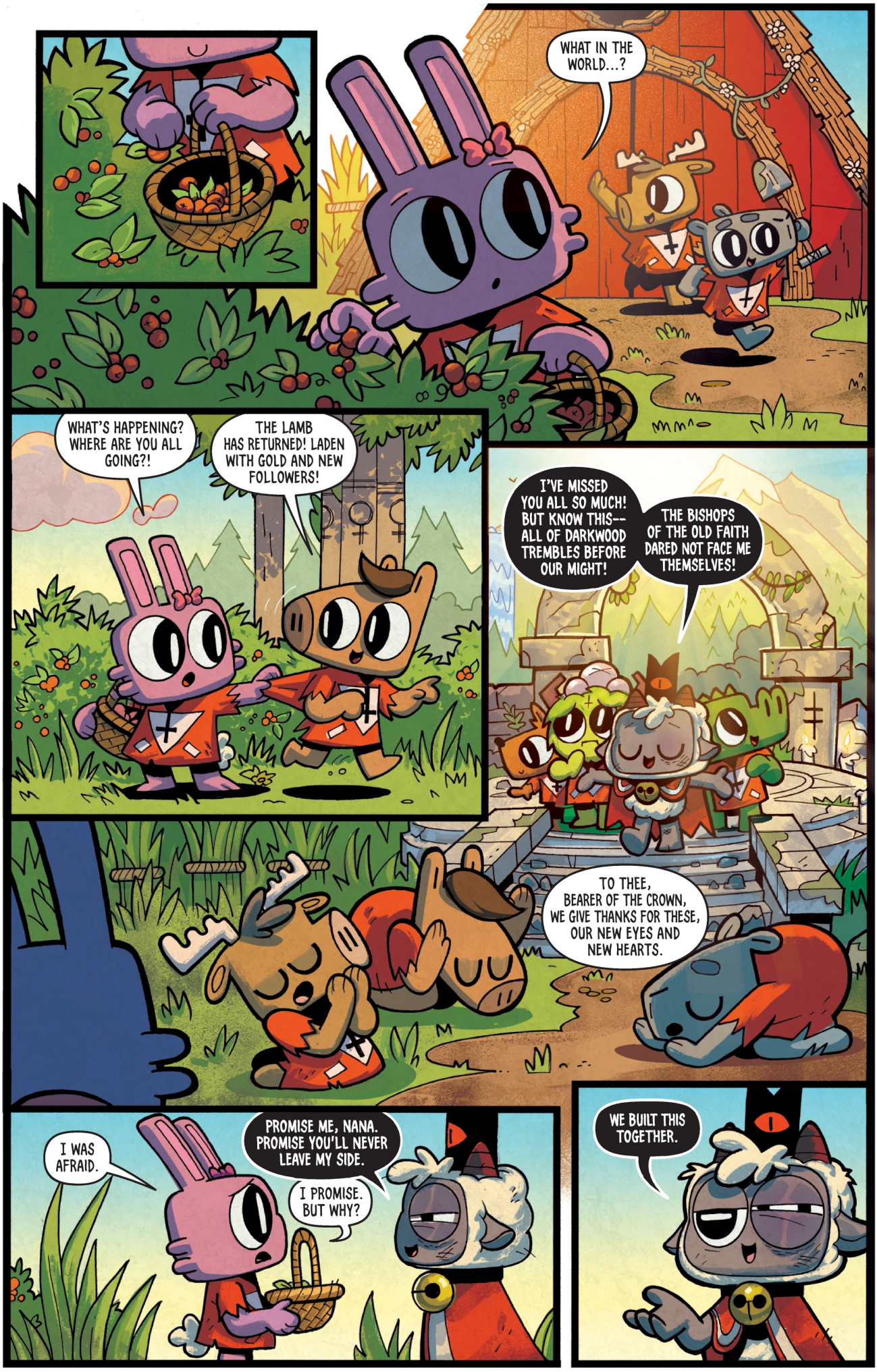
BLORT
BLORT
BLORT
...and let fly.
SWIPE
NNGG!
I FEAR NO ONE!
NO ONE!
CHOMP

SLICE
SPUK
SHUK
BLORT
PLEASE...
PLEASE DON'T KILL ME. I'LL BE GOOD.


SKrrrrr...
The Lamb walked for many hours, facing the worst Darkwood had to offer.
SHHHHH!
They began to suspect the Seer had misled them, until...
THE COMMANDMENT STONE. FINALLY.
I MUST CAUTION THEE BEFORE THOU JOINEST THIS FRAGMENT WITH ITS COUSINS, O APOSTLE OF THE NEW.
FREE WILL, ONCE TAKEN, MAY NOT BE SO EASILY RETURNED.
ART THOU CONTENT TO SHOULDER SUCH A BURDEN?
YOU ARE HARO. THE DUCK TOLD ME OF YOU.
AH, CLAUNECK. THOSE PESTILENTIAL CARDS HATH EATEN AWAY AT HIS WITS.
YET AFORE THOU TAKEST THE STONES, LET ME TELL THEE HOW THIS FALLEN WORLD, NOW ROTTED TO THE BEAMS, CAME TO BE...

"EONS AGONE, THESE LANDS WERE RIFE WITH GODS AND THEIR ADHERENTS.
"WHAT BEFELL THIS PANTHEON? ALAS. 'TIS THE NATURE OF BEASTS TO FORGET, AND OF GODS TO BE FORGOTTEN. MAYHAP THEY LEFT. MAYHAP THEY SLEPT.
"MAYHAP THEY DEVOURED AND WERE DEVOURED IN TURN.
"THOSE FEW WHO REMAINED SPREAD ROOTS, SPUN WEBS, MOLDED THIS WORLD TO MEET THEM AND THEIRS.
"TWERE A LAND OF MANY GODS ONCE. *HUNDREDS.* NOW..."

THE NEW SHALT EVER SEEK TO FREE ITSELF FROM THE CARCASS OF THE OLD.
BUT HAVE A CARE, YOUNG ONE...THE OLD MAY *STILL ACT,* EVEN IN DEATH...
...AND WILL ONLY ACCEPT THE NEW ON ITS *OWN TERMS.*
NO MORE BETRAYAL...
...NEVER AGAIN.


WHAT IN THE WORLD...?
WHAT'S HAPPENING? WHERE ARE YOU ALL GOING?!
THE LAMB HAS RETURNED! LADEN WITH GOLD AND NEW FOLLOWERS!
I'VE MISSED YOU ALL SO MUCH! BUT KNOW THIS-- ALL OF DARKWOOD TREMBLES BEFORE OUR MIGHT!
THE BISHOPS OF THE OLD FAITH DARED NOT FACE ME THEMSELVES!
TO THEE, BEARER OF THE CROWN, WE GIVE THANKS FOR THESE, OUR NEW EYES AND NEW HEARTS.
I WAS AFRAID.
PROMISE ME, NANA. PROMISE YOU'LL NEVER LEAVE MY SIDE.
I PROMISE. BUT WHY?
WE BUILT THIS TOGETHER.

YOU SEEM DIFFERENT. WHAT HAPPENED IN THERE?
I'VE DONE IT, NANA...
THE OLD FAITH COULD ONLY CRUSH US IF WE WERE DIVIDED, BUT THAT WON'T HAPPEN NOW. I HAVE A *COMMANDMENT STONE.*
A COMMANDMENT STONE? *WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!*
NANA! THE CARDS...THE *DUCK!*
I HAD TO ACT!
NANA!
LET THEM GO, CHOSEN VESSEL. I AM RELIEVED TO SEE YOU MADE IT SAFELY, AND YOU HAVE NOT RETURNED ALONE.
COME... SEE WHAT WE HAVE PREPARED FOR YOUR ARRIVAL.

A TEMPLE, READY TO BE CONSECRATED AT YOUR COMMAND, O LAMB.
NOT A TEMPLE... NO.
"...IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A HOME."
To be continued...

NEXT ISSUE AUGUST